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Milton-Edwards, B. (2017). The 'Warriors Break': Hamas and the Limits of Ceasefire Beyond Tactical Pause. *International Peacekeeping*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135333312.2017.1290528>

Published in:
International Peacekeeping

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Title Page

The 'Warriors Break': Hamas and the limits of ceasefire beyond tactical pause

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The ‘Warriors Break’: Muslim Ceasefire beyond strategic pause

Abstract

Ceasefires are a difficult thing to achieve. No more so than in the conflicts of the Middle East. Without ceasefires civilians caught in wars remain vulnerable. As recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated though ceasefires are difficult to negotiate and are far more likely to breakdown than succeed. When it comes to the notion of negotiating ceasefires with Islamist groups in particular there is a widely held belief in Western policy-making circles that the task is even harder if not impossible. This is because such counterparts are frequently viewed as holding absolutist goals and positions which are entirely incompatible with peace-making. In this article I present analysis of one such group the Palestinian Hamas movement. I find evidence that far from seeking to prolong conflict Hamas has offered ceasefires and calms on repeated occasions to Israel. This article contends that the willingness of Hamas, however, is circumscribed by the context of conflict and its other actors as well as the unwillingness of mediators and negotiations to explore inclusion of such groups into the political process.

Key words

Ceasefire, Islamist, violence, terrorism

Introduction

Ten years after Palestinians freely elected Hamas to power in the West Bank and Gaza Strip prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinians have only worsened. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as is increasingly the case elsewhere in the Middle East, multi-dimensional and protracted. Islamist groups, like Hamas have come to play a fundamental part in the conflict dynamic. Their role is also key determinant in peace-making.¹ Many though contend the Hamas is a force for conflict not peace.²

¹ Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*

² Gunning, “Peace”; Stedman, “Spoiler”

In this article we explore the extent to which mechanisms for peace-making such as a ceasefire are helpful in understanding whether a group like Hamas is interested in peace or only conflict. We explore the populist Western consensus that groups such as Hamas are embarked on a terroristic trajectory and nihilistic criminality and defiant in the face of attempts at peace-making.³

The purpose of this article is to address this issue, and provide analysis on Islamists and what might be called peace overtures of truce and ceasefire by examining Hamas. The research is particularly relevant for peace-keeping and peace-building literatures because truce and ceasefires can be a key factor in transforming pauses in war or violence conflict to negotiated peace.⁴ Yet we contend that the utility of ceasefires⁵ for purposes of confidence-building and negotiation for peace settlements are circumscribed. The reduction of the *hudna* into a tactical pause has become a default outcome of the manner in which others respond to and deal Hamas and its demands – whether they are made politically through performance at the ballot box or down the barrel of a gun.

In this article the terms ‘warriors break’ or ‘tactical pause’ refer to an operational halt in hostilities so as to re-group, review strategy and address anew conflict. With respect to Hamas these ceasefires or pauses arise out of decision-making processes within the leadership of the entire movement rather than operational field decisions by commanders of Hamas’s armed wing.⁶ For state actors like Israel or the US groups like Hamas are perceived as incapable of a halt in violent conflict for any other reason than to rearm and re-group. They see such offers from Hamas as only a tactical operational pause. Other reasons for a ceasefire as it may relate to negotiation or building for reconciliation or peace are perceived as inconceivable.⁷

³ Perry and Negrin, *Theory and practice*

⁴ Fortna, *Peacetime*

⁵ These ceasefires are known in Arabic as *hudna* or pauses in conflict *tahdiyah*

⁶ The military wing of Hamas is known as the Izz-a-din al-Qassam Brigades

⁷ Beaty, *Effects*

Working against such contentions the Hamas leadership have, as this article goes to show, have not only offered ceasefires on repeated occasions but been willing to leverage a ceasefire beyond a tactical pause towards a negotiated and more sustainable resolution of the conflict. In this respect, however, such signals have been stymied by political competitors and adversaries alike. The failures or unwillingness of other actors, including powerful mediators such as the US, to use ceasefires as an opportunity to pursue conflict management and peace-building has further undermined their usefulness for negotiation and wider conflict resolution.

The opportunity to explore the potentiality of ceasefires in relation to Islamist groups, occupying state forces and international mediators speaks to a number of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Indeed, attempts to initiate truce agreements, temporary pauses in conflicts and long-term ceasefires as a step to negotiated resolution of these complex conflicts has never been more urgent. The collapse or absence of such initiatives has attendant consequences for the stability of the wider region.

Explaining Hamas's motivation in signing up to ceasefires is subject to contested and varied interpretations. The decision to engage is explained according to a number of competing explanations: prosaic resource mobilization and political opportunity, strategic military realities in relation to the movement's relative weakness at the time particularly with respect to Israel's ongoing measures against the Palestinians, intra-group competition with the PLO, political bidding and legitimacy, defining and redefining resistance. What is largely absent from such rationalizations of Hamas discourse on this matter is reference to theological positioning on *hudna*.

Additionally, the research is particularly relevant, because it examines the opportunities and constraints within Islamist groups for ceasefire. It also highlights that a ceasefire is not sufficient in and of itself to move conflicts from violence to peace. Thus, as policymakers and diplomats ponder the challenges of mediation and negotiation of multi-dimensional and prolonged conflicts, this article helps ascertain the limitations of state and non-state actors alike. While some conclusions of this article can only be specific to this case, the findings may also be relevant to other multi-dimensional conflicts in the Middle East. This is especially the case where Islamist actors are part of violent conflicts. This is because of the

dominance of particular discourses of distrust of Islamism in Western policy-making circles. This leaves them predisposed against Islamists and the possibilities of negotiating ceasefires for peace.

Debating the discourse to cease fire

Many contributions to the discourse on peace-building address the importance of a ceasefire in foundations for peace between state and non-state armed actors or resistance groups.⁸ In the wake of the Cold War and with the explosion of new ethno-national conflicts scholars were concerned to examine the potentiality of ceasefires not only for the management but the negotiated resolution of conflicts.⁹ There was also an emerging consensus that to halt a conflict in this way addressed an important humanitarian dimension in environments where civilian casualty rates and disruption to society was greatest.¹⁰ Such literatures also recognise that cease-fires can be delicate and subject to repeated breakdown and conflict resumption.¹¹ The role of mediators and negotiators has also been identified as an important element of such approaches particularly as they relate to timing, persuasion and promotion of cease-fire beyond a halt to violence.¹²

From the standpoint of much western literature ceasefire timing is also considered to have an important effect on negotiations which create political thresholds for conflict resolution and peace.¹³ A strategy of intervention by outside parties to establish a ceasefire is recommended once violence has passed its fever pitch and as part of the peace settlement process.¹⁴ This has given rise to critiques that focus on the short-lived efficacy of such approaches and endogenous drivers of original conflict causes and the difficulties which third parties encounter in such processes.¹⁵ As has been argued in contexts as diverse as Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and DRC ceasefires in such circumstance can give parties to

⁸ DeSoto, "Ending violent conflict"; Zartman, "Mediation"

⁹ Touval, "Ethical Dilemmas "; Hauss, *International Conflict*

¹⁰ In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, civilian casualty rates on both sides are higher than military ones (<http://www.btselem.org/statistics>).

¹¹ Fortna, *Peacetime*

¹² Touval, "Ethical Dilemmas "; Zartman, *Peacemaking in international*

¹³ Darby and McGinty, *Contemporary Peacemaking* ; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, *Contemporary Conflict*

¹⁴ Crocker, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*

¹⁵ Reid, "Finding a Peace"; Bercovitch and Gartner, "Overcoming Obstacles"

the cessation of hostilities time to rearm and recalibrate their goals leading not only to resumption of hostilities but rising death tolls.¹⁶ Crocker, for example, contends that such pauses in conflicts lead to “muscle-flexing on both sides, adding to the conflict’s already massive scar tissue of distrust”.¹⁷ He thus argues that unless intimately tied to a political settlement process such ceasefires have limited utility and can even aggravate conflict. Such a perspective identifies the command within violence for otherwise disempowered political actors. It acknowledges the dynamic of violence as power in contesting legitimacy in fragile societies and broken states.¹⁸

Hamas: a dimension of modern martial Islam?

Hamas – the Islamic Resistance Movement - proves a useful case study in this discussion. Hamas, founded in 1987, is typified in most academic literature as a broad political-socio movement that is also engaged in sustained conflict with the state of Israel as occupier of Muslim *waqf* territory.¹⁹ Hamas is also a rival and competitor to factions of the Palestinian secular national movement, specifically Fatah. The rising popularity of the movement can be attributed, at least in part, to the perceived failures of Fatah within the political framework of the Oslo peace process to bring a lasting peace settlement, and dissatisfaction at its control of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority (PA).²⁰

Some studies depict Hamas as primarily a terrorist organization with all other activities subsumed.²¹ Hamas’s interpretation of particular Muslim motifs, it has been contended, is ideologically predisposed to jihad of a particular kind.²² Major contemporary Muslim scholars such as Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi have reinforced this dimension of the context in which Hamas wages jihad against Israel as a foreign occupier and usurper of Muslim lands.²³

¹⁶ Crocker, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*; Zartman, *Peacemaking in international*

¹⁷ Crocker, *Taming Intractable Conflicts* 158

¹⁸ Arendt, *On violence*

¹⁹ Milton-Edwards and Farrell, Hamas; Abu Amr, “Hamas: A Historical “; Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas*; Chehab, *Hamas: The Untold Story*; Cardici, *Hamas From Resistance*

²⁰ Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics*; Usher, “The democratic resistance “; Baconi, “The demise of Oslo”

²¹ Levitt, *Hamas: Politics* ; Schanzer, *Hamas versus Fatah*

²² Wagemakers, “Legitimizing pragmatism”; Al-Shaer, “Islam in the narrative”

²³ Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Jihad*

Irrespective of such dispositions the leadership within Hamas – which constitutes wings including the military, political leadership internally and externally as well as prison leaders - reveals a dynamic debate and discourse in respect of key positions on resistance, violence and its cessation.

Indeed, since its inception much of the Hamas' discourse, including its own charter (*mithaq*), statements and communiqués, evidences engagement with such themes. There has also been an ongoing dialogue within Hamas about ceasefire with different elements of the movement holding opposing and varying views on the topic. Hamas's opponents, however, point to documents like the charter to highlight examples of a discourse within the movement that reflects a singular violent predisposition and aversion to peace.

In reality the charter emerged as a historic document from a specific context and time when the movement was first founded in the late 1980s. Hamas leaders and scholars have since contended that elements of the charter are flexible and have changed in emphasis or have become irrelevant over time.²⁴ In more recent years there is certainly evidence that Hamas's discourse has changed by means of expressing the ways in which, for example, resistance is strategically ordered – primarily in terms of how armed resistance is emphasised and expanded to include other forms of popular and even non-violent resistance.²⁵ For example, in the wake of the Hamas electoral victory in 2006 and international debate about politically accommodating Hamas its leader Khaled Meshal (whom Israeli tried to assassinate in 1997) signalled a discursive position on what was meant by resistance declaring it to have a “political and diplomatic” form.²⁶ There is evidence, therefore, of ongoing engagement with concept of resistance and its armed dimensions including the point at which arms could be laid down. Yet what was clearly less developed from the point of Hamas's inception was the debate about the strategic

²⁴ Tamimi, *Hamas: A History*, 150-1

²⁵ Milton-Edwards, “Hamas and the Arab”

²⁶ Meshal, “Interview”

management of conflict including the application or utility of ceasefire (*hudna*)²⁷ or calm (*tahdiyah*). This would come later as the movement grew, expanded and developed.

One of the ways in which Hamas, at this point in its early evolution, was defining its position in relation to its enemy (Israel) was in terms of the religious legitimacy bestowed and accrued to its cause by defining its violence against Israel as jihad. This also allowed it to draw a distinction against their *fedayi* rivals in Fatah. Israel was deemed an illegitimate entity and occupier by Hamas. Hamas wasn't just a resistance organization (like the PLO) but it was an Islamic resistance organization and hence obliged (*fard ayn*) to engage in jihad.

Hamas perceived resistance as a Muslim duty "the day that enemies usurp part of Moslem land, Jihad becomes the individual duty of every Moslem."²⁸ As such jihad was initially defined by them according to some of the classic norms of war in Islam, including important injunctions against targeting civilians.²⁹

By and large Hamas initially defined its position around those Koranic passages and previous historical instances in Muslim history such as Salah Eddin's war against the Crusader occupation of Jerusalem which allowed for war to be waged under specific circumstances. As with the Koran, Hamas defined its early position as one of defined and limited warfare rather than limitless terror and violence.³⁰ Hamas began to give ideological import to certain dimensions of *fiqh*³¹ on jihad with far-reaching consequences for the ways in which it signified itself and was signified by others.³² It is also apparent that Hamas omitted those passages of Koranic, religious literature and history which addressed overtures of

²⁷ By *hudna* here we are referring to the classical Islamic term of a long-term truce between Muslims and their enemies. The enemy here can be both internal (a fellow Muslim) or external. In the period beginning in 628 C.E. the Prophet Mohammad called for a ten-year ceasefire, known as the Truce of Hudaib, with his enemies from the Quraysh tribe. During the *hudna* the two sides were to live in peace.

²⁸ Hamas, *Covenant*, Article 15

²⁹ Peters, *Jihad in classical*; Ghannoushi 2008

³⁰ Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics*

³¹ Jurisprudence

³² Malik, "Jihad and its development"

reconciliation, the cessation of hostilities and conclusion of peace (*sulh*) which would require ceasefires and negotiation with the enemy.

Transition

During 1990s there is evidence that the Hamas leadership engaged in a transition regarding their position on the management of conflict with Israel and with their fellow Palestinians – particularly the PLO’s major Fatah faction. We see this with respect to ceasefires. For example, during the Oslo peace process Hamas leaders, including one of its founders Sheikh Yassin went on public record with an endorsement of ceasefire.³³ This was followed in 2002 – during the second Intifada - with a serious commitment by the Hamas leadership to debating ceasefire. A year later they participated in a unilateral ceasefire alongside other Palestinian factions.³⁴ This reflects the emergence within Hamas of a serious discourse among leaders and cadres on ceasefire and other mechanisms for strategic management of conflict including its implementation, demands for reciprocation, monitoring and enforcement. A decade later, Hamas would engage in similar debates and decision-making over the practice of a pause or ‘calm’ (*tahdiyah*) in hostilities with their enemies principally Israel.

Returning to the issue of ceasefire the leadership of Hamas appear to have introduced the idea of a ceasefire as a twofold mechanism. Firstly, they used it for the purposes of tactical management of the conflict with Israel. Secondly as a political entry point to negotiation of the conflict. Tactical management is as a *hudna* as limited by a timeframe (according to Islamic tradition), “Islam permits a temporary truce for a limited period of time with the Jewish enemy if necessary,” stated Sheikh Yassin.³⁵ Secondly although the leadership at this point appeared to be offering no compromise in its position regarding the resolution of the conflict with Israel it was signalling a desire to political entry. Coupled to this discourse on *hudna* was also an implicit recognition by the Hamas leadership of Israel, delimited by the

³³ Yassin, “Interviews”; Tamimi, *Hamas: A History*: 158

³⁴ El, “Full texts of the Palestinian”

³⁵ Yassin, Author interview

1967 borders, and evidence was later to emerge of an important negotiation or dialogue dimension to conduct between Hamas and Israel.³⁶

Creating and redefining *hudna*

When the second Palestinian Intifada broke out in September 2000 it was marked by an unprecedented escalation of violence on both sides.³⁷ The extent to which civilians were disproportionately caught in violence also exerted pressures to seek ways to manage the conflict better and reduce casualty rates. This included exhortations to break the “cycle of violence” by the UN and proposals by external actors such as the US in terms of the 2001 Tenet Palestinian-Israeli Security Implementation Workplan and 2002 Zinni Ceasefire plan which called for comprehensive ceasefire.³⁸ The extent to which the reduction of such violence could be perceived as an overture for peace was difficult to discern during this phase. Palestinian groups like Hamas grappled internally with the implications of introducing such a mechanism into their remit. Israel, and its supporters, largely dismissed arguments that Hamas’s position on a ceasefire could mean anything other than a tactical pause in the conflict to re-arm and re-group against Israel.

Over the course of history ceasefire has been a flexible instrument employed by Islamic armed actors.³⁹ In the case of Hamas – a non-state armed actor under protracted Israeli occupation - a similar flexible approach appears to emerge in the thinking of the leadership during the period of the second Palestinian Intifada (2000-05). The leadership sought to balance the fundamental rhetoric and *raison d’être* of jihad as well as appear to calibrate or offer to engage in a unilateral ceasefire.⁴⁰ Hamas debate also focussed on the issue of the permissibility of targeting of Israeli civilians, particularly in suicide attacks. Tamimi contends that some of the Hamas leadership argued that this kind of targeting was an “aberration”.⁴¹ Other leaders argued that Israeli civilians could be attacked. For example, Hamas leader Dr

³⁶ Tamimi, *Hamas: A History*:156-9

³⁷ Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*

³⁸ Eiland, “The IDF in the Second”; Shikaki, “Palestinians divided”

³⁹ Holt, “Qalāwūn's Treaty”; Holt, “The Treaties”; Hroub, *HAMAS*: 55

⁴⁰ Pape, *Dying to win*

⁴¹ Tamimi, *Hamas: A History*:165

Mahmoud Zahar asserted that “if Israelis are killing Palestinian civilians then why we are not using the same means? An eye for an eye ... None of them are civilians ... they say they are a military society and in civil uniform.”⁴² Hamas’s offer of *hudna* was thus made, according to their leaders, within a specific timeframe and without concessions such as ‘recognition’ of the enemy.

As noted above Hamas’s actual participation in a ceasefire was first apparent in the initiatives of 2001-03 and included them as one among other Palestinian national factions. The ceasefire was a unilateral step by Palestinians and was not part of a negotiated or reciprocated agreement with Israel. It was a decision by Hamas (and other factions) to stop armed attacks on Israel. It was also part of a call on the international community to persuade Israel into meeting Palestinian demands to not only stop violence against Palestinians (specifically targeted assassinations), but to release prisoners and detainees, to halt illegal settlement activity, and to protect Christian and Muslim holy places as well (New York Times, 2003). An additional and interesting dynamic was that this also required Hamas and the PLO (mainly Fatah) to negotiate with each other over the terms of a ceasefire offer to Israel revealing the internal tensions and competing objectives between the two rival movements.

Authors like Gunning highlight local political developments, including changes within the Palestinian factional milieu as it related to Hamas’s power and legitimacy, to explain the dynamic in terms of religious interpretation of *hudna*. Here Hamas is portrayed in a fashion almost identical to secular nationalist factions in the Palestinian milieu.⁴³ Its religious character is emptied of meaning. This despite the specific employment of a portentous Islamic term: *hudna*.

In the Palestinian context the application of *hudna* for nationalist purposes by armed factions such as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (Fatah’s military wing) and the mapping out and commitment of leftist radical factions of the PFLP and DFLP also contributed to the reinterpretation and ownership of the *hudna*. This made it increasingly more difficult for the

⁴² Zahar, Author interview

⁴³ Gunning, *Hamas in Politics*: 222-3

concept to be viewed primarily from a historico-religious lens or for Hamas to claim it for itself alone.

In contrast to Gunning Hroub contends that Hamas “bound by its religious roots ... felt the need to justify its adoption of a controversial policy [a *hudna*] on Islamic religious grounds”.⁴⁴ It was reasoned that if *fiqh* of jihad had been employed to justify violent attack against Israel then *fiqh* limiting or ceasing such violent attacks was necessary to preserve the movement’s Islamist character. Hardliners within the movement remained sceptical of a ceasefire and this was indicative in statements from leaders such as Abdel Aziz Rantissi: “as long as we are under occupation we have to continue fighting until we finish this mission. The formula is not cease-fire because we are not two states facing each other across a border. We are under occupation and we are defending ourselves. So the word ceasefire is not working here but resistance and occupation. They should stop occupation and then we will stop resistance”.⁴⁵

Political objectives

Hamas’s experience of negotiating the June 2003 *hudna* also revealed that they would determine their position on strategic political objectives linked to their rivalry (and later enmity) with Fatah. Here, we argue, the discourse on jihad, *hudna* and avoidance of *fitnah* (internal chaos) was more ambiguous. Nevertheless Hamas leaders argued that for the sake of unity against their common enemy (Israel) and to avoid internal strife (*fitnah*) with Fatah agreement over a ceasefire was possible. This reveals a flexibility and pragmatic political utility to ceasefire in terms of internal conflicts involving rivalry between a local Islamist and nationalist actors.

Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab, who was a key figure in promoting the ceasefire mechanism explained the import of unity declaring that, “first of all we want to ... find common ground with other groups and leave our differences aside. That’s the golden rule. The common ground is: Intifada, resisting the occupation, developing better Palestinian life and reform and developing a Palestinian state and struggling towards the return of the refugees. Those are

⁴⁴ Hroub, *HAMAS*: 55

⁴⁵ Rantissi, Author interview

the main targets on the document that we tried to establish”.⁴⁶ Internal unity, of the kind addressed in the ceasefire to which the Palestinian factions signed up in June 2003 was a way in which the goal of protection from a foreign occupier and unity to confront that particular foe could be better achieved. This was a goal that Hamas could sign up to.

It is contended, therefore, that the first *hudna* unilaterally declared by the Palestinians addressed Hamas’s fundamental concern to present itself as Islamist and legitimate both in terms of Israel to whom it had declared a jihad against and its Palestinian nationalist rivals with whom it should avoid internal chaos or civil war with. More generally Palestinian supporters of Hamas also reacted positively to the declaration. This constructive reaction signalled that those who had feared that a Hamas ceasefire would gravely weaken popular support if it appeared to abandon jihad could be mistaken.

Some supporters of Hamas, however, remained unconvinced that a ceasefire would provide sufficient political dividends compared to those wrought against Israel from armed violence. This established a tension in terms of political and military leaders or hardliners and moderates in the movement though these terms were not always mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, such hardliners (including Izz-a-din al-Qassam Brigade commanders) respected the outcome of decision-making processes and played a significant part in disciplining and enforcing truces on the ground. Even when Israeli attacked Gaza in the summer of 2014 and commanders of the Izz-a-din al-Qassam Brigades wanted to continue the fight they abided by the decisions of their political leadership negotiating a new ceasefire in Cairo.

The Hamas political leadership, in particular, has always tacitly recognised that a political outcome was inevitable in the conflict with Israel. Moreover there were elements of the Hamas leadership that believed that a *hudna* would set the stage for negotiations and signalled ideological pragmatism.⁴⁷ It was a signal, however, that was regarded with deep suspicion by other actors. Israel was disbelieving, with the argument circulated that Hamas’s commitment to *hudna* was tactical, “merely inducing Hamas to stop attacks through a

⁴⁶ Abu Shanab, Author interview

⁴⁷ Hatina, “Hamas and the Oslo”:37

hudna or truce is not acceptable, since Hamas will simply wait to fight again another day while keeping its capabilities intact”.⁴⁸

The ceasefires of the second intifada period were largely a failure. Unilateral acts designed to achieve a pause in hostilities only lasted for short periods, Israeli reciprocation was limited and its military forces still continued to attack Palestinians and politically its leadership reinforced its practices of occupation.⁴⁹ The causes of the breakdown of the earlier ceasefires remain a source of debate. A number of lessons, however, were drawn. Hamas leaders concluded that unilateral *hudna* would not draw Israeli reciprocation. Some in the leadership of Hamas were unwilling to undertake further unilateral ceasefires because they disbelieved Israel’s intentions contending that Israeli violence was still perpetrated against Palestinians. All the same the challenge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at that time lay in how Hamas would remain responsive to its popular constituency and compete against its secular national rivals if there was a demand that armed attacks and violence against Israel be reduced or halted as a means to alleviate Palestinian suffering. By June 2003, for example, 73% of Palestinians wanted a ceasefire.⁵⁰ One way Hamas responded to this was to change the language around *hudna* including the introduction of new semantics in terms of the ceasefire lexicon.

A Calm (before the storm)

From 2003-5 Israeli-Palestinian cycles of violence continued but Hamas also reduced suicide attacks and it became evident that it would instead launch rockets at Israel. The hope of another *hudna* seemed remote but as Hamas sought to capitalise on domestic political opportunities to challenge the hegemonic institutional hold of Fatah over the PA it announced it would participate in a pause /period of *tahdiyah*.

The predominance of political over military and religious steams within the movement created new opportunities to consider a pause or period of ‘calm’ and on this occasion would create an opportunity for Hamas to participate in Palestinian local elections and play

⁴⁸ Ganor, “Countering Hamas”

⁴⁹ Milton-Edwards and Crooke, “Elusive ingredient”

⁵⁰ PSR, Opinion Poll

a part in facilitating the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. In March 2005 President Abbas announced a *tahdiyah* which Hamas agreed to abide by. On this occasion Hamas leaders were specific that they would agree to conditions that constituted 'calm' rather than a ceasefire (*hudna*). Hamas leader Khaled Meshal argued that the move to reduce violence against Israel was an entirely legitimate element of maintaining the resistance.⁵¹

The *tahdiyah* lasted for more than a year and in that time Hamas capitalised on the opportunity to contest Palestinian local and (and for the first time) legislative elections against its main rival in Fatah.⁵² The political gain was apparent but weighed against wider ideological factors created tension within the movement as hardliners complained of a degree of capitulation in terms of resistance against Israel and salafi-jihadi elements such as al-Qaeda scorned and critiqued Hamas. By contesting for power in the local arena through elections Hamas abided by its own undertakings to desist from violent attacks against Israel. Once again the Hamas leadership demonstrated how it could engender discipline and enforcement of such decisions over the entire movement, including the Izz-a-din al-Qassam Brigades. Hamas gained from its decision to halt violence against Israel as it was left relatively unhindered by Israel during this period to freely campaign and compete for votes. The outcome of the elections, though a surprise, created the opportunity for Hamas to achieve political power; Hamas won 74 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian legislature and many Palestinian municipalities also became dominated by them.⁵³

Once elected to power its leadership initially indicated that the possibility of a long-term truce (*hudna*) could be back on the agenda and that it was prepared to negotiate on such terms. Khaled Meshal declared to Israel, "If you are willing to accept the principle of a long-term truce, we are prepared to negotiate the terms. Hamas is extending a hand of peace to those who are truly interested in a peace based on justice".⁵⁴ This scenario, however, was dependent on the reactions of other actors to Hamas' democratic victory and the ways in which the offer of a ceasefire was perceived and understood. Israel continued to reject such offers and contended that they were nothing more than rhetorical statements as Hamas

⁵¹ Meshal, "Interview, *Al Ahram*"

⁵² Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*

⁵³ Milton-Edwards, "Prepared for power"

⁵⁴ Meshal, "We will not sell "; Butcher, "Hamas offers deal"

exploited its ballot box gains to entrench power against its rivals in Fatah. It remained sceptical that Hamas would abide by such an agreement when it failed to incorporate recognition of Israel and an agreement to fully cease from all violence and abide by previous Palestinian-Israeli agreements. It also refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Palestinian electoral victory visited on Hamas.⁵⁵ Fatah, for its part, initially refused to work with Hamas.

In November 2006 Hamas announced a further *tahdiyah* to limit violent attacks on Israel. The rationale of this move was questioned by Palestinians in the context of Hamas's substantive discourse about resistance against Israel, the principles of jihad and the right to employ legitimate violence in defence from Israeli military attack. Furthermore, some argued that Hamas had become Israel's security guarantor against attacks launched from Gaza.

Hamas was soon embroiled in serious internecine conflict in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As inter-Palestinian violence flared the resort to localised ceasefire was a key mechanism which was employed by a variety of local actors, including Egyptian diplomats in Gaza, to try to halt and ultimately end Hamas-Fatah bloodshed. Local negotiators in Palestinian reconciliation committees along with others negotiated *tahdiyah* agreements between armed Palestinian factions. Yet the need for such a mechanism at a local level was obviated by the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 and the rout of pro-Fatah and PA forces.⁵⁶ Under Hamas's complete control in Gaza the *tahdiyah* against Israel was maintained.

By June 2008 it was announced that the Hamas leadership – through mediation by the Government of Egypt – had reached a new *tahdiyah* with Israel. The truce would begin with Gaza and then extend to the West Bank. In Cairo for discussions were Hamas hardliners Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar and Minister of the Interior Said Siam.⁵⁷ The key

⁵⁵ In August 2006 Hamas ended its *tahdiyah* with Israel following the kidnap of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Shalit was held in captivity until released in October 2011 after negotiation with Israel in an exchange for more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners

⁵⁶ Milton-Edwards and Farrell, *Hamas*; Rose, "Gaza bombshell"

⁵⁷ Said Siam was assassinated by Israel in Gaza on 15 January 2009 during Operation Cast Lead

elements of this first time agreement with Israel were based on principles of reciprocity from Israel, Egyptian mediation and a graduated decline of violence from Hamas. Sending well-known hardliners to negotiate in Cairo was an important signal of internal unity in the Hamas leadership. Elements of Hamas-Israel reciprocity centred on a suspension of violence. According to Hamas leader Dr Zahar Israel agreed to “lift the blockade of the Gaza Strip and reopen all the crossing points”.⁵⁸ Importantly the 2008 agreement also included a role for the mediator: Egypt. Egypt would not only undertake some guarantees as it related to crossing points under its control to Gaza but was committed to maintaining Palestinian factional dialogue and direct mediation with Israel. What was absent from the agreement, however, was a mechanism for monitoring and verifying the ceasefire or steps to tackle possible relapse to violence between the two sides.

Hamas embarked on a campaign to sell the agreement. Leader Mushir al-Masri, argued that the *tahdiyah* had not compromised the movement in terms of its ideological position on jihad but had in fact created gains for Palestinians, particularly those suffering under the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. “It” [*tahdiyah*], argued al-Masri, “was according to our terms and not Israel. We didn’t give into Israel’s terms on [Israeli hostage Gilad] Schalit, on weapons, on forcing factions, or on power consolidation”.⁵⁹ Throughout the summer of 2008, however, it was increasingly evident from Hamas discourse that it did not believe that Israel was keeping its side of the *tahdiyah* bargain. Chief among Hamas’s concerns was that Israel lift – rather than ease - its blockade on the population of the Gaza Strip. Israel’s blockade of Gaza would be an issue that Hamas would repeatedly prioritise in its subsequent ceasefire negotiations with Israel during the violent conflicts of 2008, 2012 and 2014.⁶⁰ Israel was reported to be dragging its feet with international aid agencies reporting to US diplomats that there was “little improvement in Gazans’ daily lives”.⁶¹

In this respect the confidence building measures often considered necessary for a ceasefire to hold and to lead to negotiation between contesting parties to reduce or resolve conflict was considered insufficient by one of the armed parties. As the *tahdiyah* progressed

⁵⁸ Zahar, Author interview

⁵⁹ al-Masri, Author interview

⁶⁰ Thrall, “Hamas’s Chances”

⁶¹ Walles, “Gaza: More food”

throughout 2008 differences within the Hamas leadership also emerged. Gaza leader Ghazi Hamad called the *tahdiyah* “dirty politics” but conceded that it had allowed Hamas to “jump into the political square in a very short time” but that the compromises that had been required of the movement had led to a “contradiction between resistance, politics and ideology”.⁶² Another Hamas leader put it more bluntly when he stated that despite the *tahdiyah* with Israel, “we [people in Gaza] are still struggling and suffering. There is a shortage of everything.” He further asserted that while the *tahdiyah* had led to a “drop in the number of funerals the real fruits of the ceasefire such as agriculture development, building materials, etc. have not materialised. They [people] don’t have faith in Israel and say it’s just a tactic”.⁶³ Two months into the *tahdiyah* the UN reported that the number of goods allowed into Gaza by Israel had actually decreased (OCHA 2008). Despite some infringements the calm lasted until November 4 2008 when Israeli soldiers undertook an operation into Gaza and killed 6 Hamas members. The subsequent escalation led to Israel’s major attack on Gaza in Operation Cast Lead a month later.

The ‘Warriors Break’ - Conflict amidst calm and ceasefires

The subsequent Israeli attacks against Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 called Operation Cast Lead, in November 2012 called Operation Pillar of Defence and in July-August 2014 during Operation Protective Edge, must be seen in the context of the failure of the *tahdiyah* from the perspective of both Israel and Hamas. Hamas propaganda had to ‘sell’ such pauses as tactical and were increasingly referred to affiliate publications as the “warriors break” declaring that the “Zionist occupation yields unanimously to a reciprocal *tahdiyah*”.⁶⁴ Wagemakers argues that Hamas have been compelled to scale back on the demands it could win from Israel in return for a form of ceasefire.⁶⁵ Hamas leaders such as Khaled Meshal began to articulate the *tahdiyah* explicitly in terms of Israel’s blockade of Gaza and as a tactical response, “[its] a tactic in conflict management and a phase in the framework of the resistance,” continuing he said, “the *tahdiya* creates a step that will force Israel...to remove the siege...and if it happens it will be a remarkable achievement....We are

⁶² Hamad, Author interview

⁶³ Yousef, Author interview

⁶⁴ Abu Amer “Tahdiyah”: 1

⁶⁵ Wagemakers, “Legitimizing Pragmatism”:372

speaking of a tactical *tahdiya*... As long as there is occupation, there is no other way but resistance".⁶⁶

The goal of durable ceasefire should have been regarded as a key component of conflict management and confidence building measures but it was not.⁶⁷ Despite its obvious role in initiating, negotiating, observing and ensuring the enforcement of ceasefires Hamas were still perceived by Israel and its key allies, such as the US, as promoting its counter-agenda with a fundamental impulse to the violent destruction of Israel. The argument that Hamas utilising ceasefires as "breathing space to rearm before resuming violence with even greater intensity and loss of life than before" became a self-fulfilling prophesy.⁶⁸ Hamas leaders had actually and repeatedly signalled otherwise. Hamas leaders appeared to be seeking the active intervention of mediators and monitors from the international community as a means of transitioning from conflict. As Hamas leader Usama Hamdan asserted "what we are seeking to have is a real ceasefire which can be guaranteed by the international community. It has to prevent Israel from attacking the Palestinians and at the same time open our borders, and permit the Palestinian people to have a normal life".⁶⁹ Here the case was being articulated by Hamas in relation to the demand for the end of the Israeli blockade which for 8 years had collectively punished the entire population of the Gaza Strip.⁷⁰ But it was one which its enemy and mediators to the conflict could not hear.⁷¹ Furthermore it was indeed all the more difficult to determine the intentions of the leadership of the movement when such ceasefires collapsed due to broader local and regional dynamics. It is important, therefore to recognise the contexts in which ceasefires broke down rather than assume causalities that might be less than clear.

Throughout this period, as the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians collapsed, the region was rocked by the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the rise of extremist Islamist groups such as ISIS in Iraq and Syria it appeared that neither Hamas nor Israel had much

⁶⁶ Meshal, "Hamas truce"

⁶⁷ Mahieu, "When should mediators"

⁶⁸ Crocker, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*: 10

⁶⁹ Hamdan, Author interview

⁷⁰ OCHA, "Humanitarian Report"

⁷¹ Touval, "Ethical Dilemmas "; Mahieu, "When should mediators"

incentive to sue for a ceasefire of any substance and longevity. It can be contended that each side has been making strategic calculations about the regional security environment and have been content to maintain the status quo. Additionally some mediators have exhibited a predisposition to accept the status quo in terms of security interests. It is also clear that neither Israel nor Hamas have been perceived by their local supporter as having achieved ceasefires that have brought tangible benefits in terms of security, stability and confidence building measures. In 2014 more than 86% of Israelis were unhappy with the ceasefire agreement reached by their political leaders with Hamas.⁷² There is the contention that Israel was not serious about a reciprocated arrangement with Hamas. For example, the Israeli press has revealed that Israeli leaders had only agreed to the June 2008 *tahdiyah* in order to engage in military preparations for a strike against Gaza.⁷³ Using a ceasefire for a pause appears to have been an Israeli tactic too. Hamas were also trapped and failed to understand that the kind of calm or ceasefire they were offering did not predispose other actors to build on such activities in terms of confidence building.

Neither Israel nor Hamas has felt that they had 'their' kind of ceasefire. Israel equated a Hamas ceasefire with surrender and Hamas with victory over Israel. The drawbacks were obvious. On the other hand the unwillingness of Israel and the Obama administration to promote a rapid halt to hostilities and recognise important political conditions to maintain a ceasefire in Gaza were apparent during the 2014 Gaza war.⁷⁴ This is explicable for a number of reasons. Firstly intra-Palestinian political frameworks, especially between Fatah and Hamas gave rise to forms of spoiler behaviours by Fatah whenever it perceived its rival as gaining ground over them domestically or externally, even with respect to cease-fires.⁷⁵ Fatah's attempts at hegemony over the framework of peace-building and negotiation was perceived as essential in terms of its legitimacy among Palestinians and with foreign donors. Fatah were highly resistant to any attempts which would result in them becoming secondary actors. Secondly Israel's approaches and actions around ceasefire-collapse, violence and

⁷² Sharkov, "86.5% of Israelis"

⁷³ Roy, *Hamas and civil*:229

⁷⁴ Judis, "Ending the Israeli"

⁷⁵ Abu Toameh, "How Arab rivalries"

ceasefire making are highly problematic. In 2009, a study by Kanwisher et al concluded that contrary to popular perception in the Western media “it is overwhelmingly Israel that kills first after a pause in the conflict,” leading to Palestinian retaliation and ceasefire collapse.⁷⁶ Israel had opportunities to engage in mutual negotiation of ceasefires and had averred from reciprocation.⁷⁷

Moreover, with recent developments of reciprocation and mutual ceasefire negotiation mediated by Egypt the internal schism in Israel’s negotiating framework has again been exposed as tactical rather than substantive in terms of negotiating peace.⁷⁸ In the protracted and complex mediation processes that began to lead to the ceasefire arrangements to which Hamas would agree to Israel’s belligerence was exposed. This is evidenced by the assertions of Israeli negotiator Gershon Baskin who alleged that Israel, in full knowledge that Hamas leaders, including the commander of the Izz-a-din al-Qassam Brigades Ahmad Ja’bari, had agreed a permanent ceasefire deal in November 2012, then assassinated the aforementioned Ja’bari sparking a further round of conflict in which Palestinian civilian casualties were significantly high.⁷⁹

By 2014, with the collapse of support for Hamas from important supporters in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, Hamas were being manoeuvred to agree to Israel’s demands to end rocket attacks and maintain exclusion zones in what the UN refers to as a “buffer zone” between Israel and Gaza. Mediators with a history of engagement with Hamas – such as Qatar and Turkey were increasingly excluded from negotiation processes in favour of Egypt.⁸⁰ Hamas compliance to Israeli demands was perceived evidence of its weakness which no amount of self-proclaimed victory rhetoric could cover. Hamas continued to reiterate that no deals would be possible without a minimum of lifting the siege of Gaza, open borders, external monitoring of Israeli withdrawal and a cessation of all Israeli military

⁷⁶ Kanwisher et al, “Reigniting Violence”

⁷⁷ Crooke and Milton-Edwards, “Costly Choice”

⁷⁸ Savir, “Israel, Hamas negotiate”

⁷⁹ Baskin, “Israeli Negotiator”; B’tselem, “Human Rights violations”

⁸⁰ Barakat, “Qatari Mediation”

actions including the targeted assassinations of their own political and military leadership in Gaza and elsewhere. But the conflict in 2014 also exposed divisions in Hamas over ceasefire negotiations mediated in Cairo with commanders of the armed wing arguing against such discussions and in favour of prolongation of violence against Israel.⁸¹

There were little by way of political opportunities for substantive negotiation or sustained confidence building measures created by such truces for either Israel or Hamas in terms of reducing enmity or ultimately preserving security for either side. Hamas, however, continues to attempt to capitalise on its position in the Palestinian political landscape in opposition to President Abbas and Fatah and refer to a ceasefire with Israel and a negotiation of it (involving a variety of diverse mediators) as an option.⁸² Resistance still remains on the agenda for Hamas alongside its claim to governance in Gaza and it still advocates for ceasefire terms. In 2009 and 2012 Hamas began planning for Gaza recovery and reconstruction before Israel's operations had ended but in 2014 the scale of loss to Hamas and the citizens of the Gaza Strip have proved to be greater than its own capacity to rebuild and reconstruct. It has remained bounded by concerns within Gaza that were prevalent before the end of the *tahdiyah* and which the *tahdiyah* failed to deliver on for them. Hence the political dimensions of the recovery and reconstruction centres on: humanitarian assistance, an end to Israel's siege regime, open borders and crossings, inter-Palestinian rivalries and tensions, the relationship with Israel and the relationship with other external regional and international actors.⁸³

Amidst destruction Hamas's self-declared victories have begun to have a hollow ring. The ensuing periods of early-recovery and reconstruction have proved delicate and volatile in terms of the fractious political milieu that the cessation of violence had occurred in. Hamas has yielded much and this had been as a result of pressure on the movement from Gaza. Hamas has subsequently dedicated the energies of the organization to maintaining legitimacy in Gaza through attempting to steering the recovery and reconstruction process,

⁸¹ Abu Obeidah, "Izz-a-din al-Qassam"

⁸² ICG, "Crisis Group"

⁸³ Bouris 2015

governance, indirect negotiations with Israel (via Egypt) and direct negotiations with PLO/Fatah/PA. Negotiations indirect or otherwise have failed to manifest long-term change. Hamas has used reconstruction funding issues rather than resistance claims to underscore its legitimacy in Gaza. For example, in 2009 Hamas's Ismail Said Radwan stated that the movement's priority was the establishment of a Higher Committee for Reconstruction. "The legitimate government and the national factions [in Gaza] will supervise the reconstruction project, in addition to Arab countries who are interested in helping out ... We want aid to go to the people who deserve it".⁸⁴ In the wake of the war of 2014 that ambition for reconstruction was thwarted by the further degradation of Hamas's, along with the citizens of Gaza, capacities as a national resistance organisation and governing movement. Hamas had also lost important Arab allies who were no longer as interested or whose energies and resources were diverted to other conflicts in the region.

The prospect of Hamas and Israel negotiating a more permanent ceasefire has, since 2014, periodically been raised in public by both sides. There is little evidence, however, that the government of Netanyahu, has been willing to shoulder this initiative and thus engender support from its powerful allies. By 2016 the calm had largely been maintained but the precariousness of the status quo was recognised as no substitute for peace.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that despite numerous ceasefires and pauses a political settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through negotiation which involves a key actor such as Hamas seems no nearer to resolution. Hamas has demonstrated that it is capable of engaging with the concepts of *hudna* and *tahdiyah* with demands from Israel that would, if adequately monitored and enforced be effective measures for confidence building. Hamas promotes these demands first and foremost as a localised Palestinian resistance organization that 'competes' with other Palestinian factions to claim the resistance for themselves and to frame and reframe it within some Islamist discourses – principally as it

⁸⁴ Radwan, Author interview

relates to jihad. In this respect they differ little from other resistance or liberation groups in Columbia, Northern Ireland or the Basque region in terms of their rhetoric about resistance but their recognition that inclusion to a political process can be sought through a ceasefire.

It is also clear that, unlike Columbia, Northern Ireland or the Basque region, the political actors with which Hamas contends with (such as Israel, the EU and the US) do not support or seek to utilise ceasefire as a mechanism for conflict resolution. This is because this would require such actors to dialogue with Hamas, negotiate with them and the admission of Hamas into a political or diplomatic process from which it has been firmly excluded.

Hamas appears to have discovered early on that in relation to Israel resistance to a negotiated ceasefire and continued policies of aggression including targeted assassination means that it will not engage in the measures that Hamas requires from it in return for a cessation of violence. In this respect the framework of occupation and a desire to control and subdue the Palestinians and to degrade or even finish Hamas means that the limited goal of a ceasefire is often viewed as an unsatisfactory half measure, especially by some in Israel's military and security institutions.⁸⁵ Despite this Hamas has continued to embark on such measures and in large part this is explained by its desire to emerge as a significant if not the most significant Palestinian actor and to marginalise the hegemonic hold of Fatah and the PA in terms of power.

Theological or Islamist discourse is not as significant in terms of Hamas's calculations as its mobilising discourse and rhetoric. Does this mean that in some ways Hamas has acculturated to the nationalist environment in which it was established and still operates in? Certainly there is evidence of a dissonance between the rhetorical language of resistance (*muqawama*)/jihad and its decade-long participation in a variety of *hudna* and *tahdiyah*. If the evidence here is that Hamas acts as a political national movement then engaging it in

⁸⁵ Catignani, "Variation"

terms of reality rather than existential ideological threat holds out the slightest hope that the *hudna* could allow the movement to move beyond the “warrior’s break” or tactical pause. The obstacle to such a course remains the framework for mediation, negotiation and reciprocity, and a need to understand the limits of proscription in the dialogue for peace.

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